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ABSTRACT

At all levels, Chicanos and Chicanas drop out of school at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group, eventually resulting in under-representation within institutions of higher education. Although all Latino subgroups experience barriers to their education, Chicanos have the lowest rate of college completion (5 percent). Central to the academic persistence of Chicano college students is the need for a culturally relevant and supportive university community. A university environment should be culturally inclusive and should welcome and validate the values of all its members in promoting optimal growth and learning. Equally important are the commitment and efforts of individuals in and around the community to be active resources for Chicano students. Cultural ambiance and community commitment are interdependent and interwoven such that cultural ambiance cannot truly exist without community commitment, and commitment must be demonstrated by actions that modify traditional university norms, values, and perceptions. Cultural ambiance occurs within four domains: general university environment, student learning environment, classroom and curriculum environment, and faculty environment. Each of these domains is briefly discussed to contextualize the experiences of Chicano students. The roles of faculty, family, and community leaders in creating and maintaining a university community are described. Recommendations are offered in each domain. (Contains 37 references.) (SV)

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Comunidad: Promoting the Educational Persistence and Success of Chicana/o College Students

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University of Wisconsin-Madison

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May 1999

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May 1999

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Comunidad: Promoting the Educational Persistence and Success of Chicana/o College Students

Comunidad: *The key to Chicana/o college student educational success*

The undereducation of Chicana/os fosters a context of neglect and segregates them from vocational and career opportunities, reinforcing their subordinate positions within the United States' societal infrastructure (Aguirre and Martinez, 1993). From as early as grade school, Chicana/os drop out of school at a much higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). The number of Chicana/os who drop out, or stop out, of school is staggering, resulting in a disproportional under-representation within (and graduation from) institutions of higher education as compared to their demographic representation in the U.S. (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 1998; President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1996). Although all Latino subgroups experience barriers to their education, Chicana/os have the lowest rate of college completion (5%) as compared to Puerto Ricans (10%) and Cubans (20%) (Chapa and Valencia, 1993).

The admission that dropping out is not a random act (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 1998) accurately acknowledges and incorporates the influence of political, social, and environmental factors affecting the educational pursuits of Chicana/o students of all ages. In fact, academic drop out and stop out is considered a logical outcome given the sociopolitical and socioeconomical barriers that limit Chicana/os. For instance, many Chicana/os encounter economic distress, attend overcrowded and segregated schools with limited educational resources, confront educational stereotypes and biases, and face underemployment or lack of employment (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 1998). Unfortunately, the low levels of academic achievement of Chicana/os translate into their being woefully unprepared to access employment and to meaningfully contribute to social change (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 1998).

For those Chicana/o students who are able to access higher education, they must (a) address many transitional and adjustment issues, and (b) traverse nonsupportive and even hostile environments (Cervantes, 1988; Fields, 1988; Ponterotto, 1990). For instance, Chicana/o college students must deal with the attitudinal and behavioral implications of stereotypes, social bias, and personal prejudices held by the university system, faculty, and other students (Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs, 1998). In this community, a common but erroneous belief is that Chicana/o culture is inferior and detrimental to Chicana/o academic achievement (Retish and Kavanaugh, 1992). Consequently, Chicana/o college students, their families, and their communities (e.g., religious institutions, merchants, social clubs) are often judged as being unable, unwilling, or undeserving of rights and roles within institutions of higher education. As a result, the contributions and strengths of Chicana/o communities and their members are often overlooked.

Even more alarming is that many Chicana/o college students internalize these negative messages and question their place within higher education (Cervantes, 1988; Vasquez, 1982). Negotiating the academic environment is often discouraging for Chicana/o students as there is a paucity of Chicana/o faculty and administrators in higher education who can serve as role models or mentors (de los Santos and Rigual, 1994). As a result, Chicana/o students find themselves having to balance their cultural values and beliefs with those of the academic system (Fiske, 1988; Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius, 1996). Although being able to traverse different environments demonstrates their abilities to be adaptable or bicultural, institutions of higher education must expand their learning environments to be more inclusive of multicultural and multicontextual perspectives.

In order to understand the cycle of undereducation for Chicana/os, there is a need to examine the influence of unwelcoming university environments. In facilitating the persistence of Chicana/os through higher education, a community-based intervention

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that emphasizes relationships is targeted. *Comunidad* is central to this intervention as a learning environment that is personally and culturally congruent for Chicana/o students and is critical for their academic persistence and success.

Central to the academic persistence decisions of Chicana/o college students is the need for a culturally relevant and supportive university community (Gloria, 1997). First, it is necessary to create and maintain a university setting that is culturally inclusive or has a comprehensive cultural ambiance. That is, a comprehensive environment should welcome and validate the values of all its members (e.g., students, faculty, and administrators) in promoting optimal growth and learning. Second, but equally important, is the active commitment and efforts of those individuals in and around the university who contribute to and comprise the totality of the community. That is, student organizations, faculty, and other university personnel, local business and community leaders, and families must be active resources for Chicana/o students. Cultural ambiance and community commitment, therefore, are interdependent and interwoven in such a way that (a) cultural ambiance cannot truly exist without community commitment and (b) commitment must be demonstrated by actions that modify traditional university norms, values, and perceptions.

Cultural ambiance occurs within four domains: (a) general university environment, (b) student training and learning environment, (c) classroom and curriculum environment, and (d) faculty environment (Gloria and Pope-Davis, 1997). Each of these domains will be briefly discussed to contextualize the experiences of Chicana/o students and to identify the need to create and maintain a university community. Next, the role of faculty, family, and community leaders (from local business, social, and religious organizations) in creating and maintaining a university community will be described. Finally, recommendations for the university community to promote cultural ambiance are provided.

Cultural Ambiance

General University Environment

Although universities recruit Chicana/os and other students from diverse backgrounds to their campuses, they often fail to accept responsibility for providing an environment that is inclusive of all its members (Choi-Pearson and Gloria, 1995). Unfortunately, the cultural values of these students are unappreciated, unrecognized, and merely tolerated (Ponterotto, Martinez, and Hayden, 1986). In particular, Chicana/o students experience feelings of nonentitlement to academic opportunities and resources (DeFreece, 1987).

Furthermore, the environment of higher education is homogeneous by class, race, ethnicity, and gender, espousing a White, male, middle-class orientation (Aguirre and Martinez, 1993; Canabal, 1993; Erickson and Rodriguez, 1997). Consequently, those values, beliefs, or behaviors that are different are perceived as deviant (Gloria and Pope-Davis, 1997). The expectation that Chicana/o and other racial and ethnic minority students must assimilate into the university environment that is homogeneous in values and beliefs minimizes student differences and experiences. In particular, institutions of higher learning often force Chicana/os and other racial and ethnic minorities to cloak their identities in order to fit into the academic environment (Cervantes, 1988). As a result, Chicana/o students are likely to question their rights and roles within an environment that overtly and covertly does not reflect or welcome them.

Student Training and Learning Environment.

A specific element of the general university experience is the student training and learning environment (Gloria and Pope-Davis, 1997). The underrepresentation of Chicana/os on college campuses results in the phenomena of Chicana/os being one of few racial and ethnic minority students on campus and in the classroom (Farrell and Jones, 1988). "Being a lonely only" on campus and in class in part accounts for the alienation, isolation, and cultural incongruence that many Chicana/o students experience (Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius, 1996). For instance, the frequent request by faculty for Chicana/o students to give the Hispanic point of view places students in alienating positions of having to represent their entire race or ethnicity (Choi-Pearson and Gloria, 1995).

Classroom and Curriculum Environment.

A specific element of the student training and learning environment holds instructors responsible for conceptualizing culture within the classroom and curriculum environment. Unfortunately, faculty often

conceptualize issues of diversity or culture as secondary class materials, typically setting aside one class period to discuss issues of race, ethnicity, or culture (at the end of the semester, if time permits). This approach minimizes the influence and importance of diversity, conveying a message to students that these issues can and should be discussed in isolation from other class materials. Faculty may argue that diversity issues do not affect their area of study, however, ideas and examples do not exist devoid of cultural values or perspectives (Gloria and Pope-Davis, 1996).

Assuming a White, male, middle-class perspective restricts opportunities for the integration of sociocontextual and sociopolitical factors (e.g., race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, cultural values) into the classroom and the curriculum. Furthermore, culturally-restricted dialogue minimizes the academic, personal, and social experiences of all students. As a result, Chicana/o (and other racial and ethnic minority) students feel alienated and isolated in their classrooms.

Faculty Environment

The university infrastructure is often directly accountable for the lack of support provided to racial and ethnic minority faculty members, in particular Chicana/os (Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988; Verdugo, 1995). That is, faculty of color are often personally and professionally marginalized, yet are expected to fulfill the extensive requests for service and community activities (Aguirre 1987). For instance, academic skills, programmatic research agendas, and the personal competency of faculty of color are questioned as a result of their minority group status (Luz Reyes and Halcon, 1988). Unfortunately, a similar process of marginalization and isolation occurs for Chicana/o faculty as it does for Chicana/o students, as few faculty members and even fewer administrators are Chicana/o (de los Santos and Rigual, 1994).

For instance, recent research indicated a 1:76 faculty to student ratio for Chicana/os, as compared to a 1:24 faculty to student ratio for Whites (Closing the Hispanic Faculty Gap, 1995). Because of the low faculty to student ratio and the commitment to their communities, Chicana/o faculty are more likely to spend time and energy mentoring Chicana/o (and other racial and ethnic minority) students and engaging in community activities. As a result, Chicana/o faculty have less time for traditional tenure-related activities. Although universities expect Chicana/o faculty to help Chicana/o students traverse the academic system and also to provide community-related services, these community service activities typically are not factored into tenure decisions. In describing this paradox, Olmedo (1990) cogently argued that the reason [Chicana/o faculty] are hired is the reason [Chicana/o faculty] will be fired (p. 101).

Supporting the Chicana/o University Community

Cultural ambiance must occur to facilitate the academic persistence and success of Chicana/o students. The creation of this ambiance, however, requires commitment and genuine support from both academic and nonacademic members of surrounding communities (Gloria, 1997; Quevedo-García, 1987). For instance, community leaders, student organizations on campus, students' families, and faculty mentors need to create and maintain a university community for Chicana/o students. These resources are of particular importance as they can provide support networks to bolster students' confidence in their ability to perform the tasks necessary to persist and succeed academically (i.e., increase a student's sense of self-efficacy) (Solberg and Villareal, 1997).

Whether academic or nonacademic, the importance of role models and mentors cannot be underestimated. The mere presence of Chicana/o faculty who have traversed and succeeded within the educational system indicates to Chicana/o students that they too can academically succeed (Verdugo, 1995). Chicana/o role models or mentors can help Chicana/o students access support systems, know about different academic or financial opportunities, and believe in their personal power and confidence within the academic environment. In summary, Chicana/o faculty members who believe in Chicana/o students' personal and professional abilities should encourage students.

A mentoring relationship is of particular importance because students must traverse their native and academic cultures, an experience that requires psychic energy (Anzaldúa, 1990). That is, students are challenged to maintain their personal and cultural integrity as they establish balance between competing values from their academic and native environments (Fiske, 1988; Gloria and Rodriguez, 1998; Ruiz and Casas, 1981). For instance, classroom behaviors (e.g., questioning the perspectives of an authority/faculty member) do not always generalize to the home environment

and vice versa (Nieto, 1996; Ruiz and Casas, 1981). Because balance or cultural congruence predicts academic persistence (Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius, 1996), support from a mentor who has negotiated the higher education system as a student and faculty member can be helpful. Similarly, student organizations can provide emotional, social, and cultural support. Student organizations such as MEChA can offer (a) social networking opportunities and (b) information regarding academic resources on campus. The knowledge that there are other Chicana/o students who are experiencing similar academic and personal obstacles can only serve to bolster confidence and unity.

Two other support systems that are rarely accessed to promote the educational success of Chicana/o college students are families and community organizations (Gloria, 1997; Quevedo-García, 1987). Unfortunately, Chicana/o families are oftentimes not conceptualized as a primary element influencing the educational tenure of students, which may in part be explained by the stereotype that Chicana/o parents hold low educational aspirations for their children. In fact, research has indicated that Chicana/o parents have equal or higher educational aspirations (i.e., to attend four or more years of college) for their children as other parents (Quintana, Vogel, and Ybarra, 1991; Retish and Kavanaugh, 1992). Not including Chicana/o parents disempowers their ability to be a part of their children's education. Furthermore, overlooking relational values (e.g., *familismo*) in Chicano families discredits the role that family can play in retaining and graduating Chicana/o students.

Although research has indicated a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational achievement (National Center for Research in Vocational Education, 1992), there has been a complex history of apathy and mistrust between Chicana/o communities and institutions of higher education (Nevárez-La Torre and Hidalgo, 1997). Nevertheless, the Chicana/o community offers students unique resources to support Chicana/o students that the academic setting is unable to provide. For instance, systems available in the Chicana/o community offer students cultural identification, friendships, crisis intervention, spiritual affiliation, [and] accessibility to community members (Delgado and Humm-Delgado, 1982, p.87). As a result, interventions that are Chicana/o community-based may be more viable for Chicana/o students than university-developed interventions (Nevárez-La Torre and Hidalgo, 1997).

Recommendations

In creating a comprehensive university community for Chicana/o students, the following proposed recommendations are a point from which to provide support for Chicana/o students.

General University Environment

1. In fostering a positive attitude about the academic environment, local businesses or community organizations could offer incentives to Chicana/o students for completing specific educational tasks. For instance, a dry cleaning service could offer discounts for Chicana/o students who earn at least a 3.0 grade point average. Although this deed does not directly change the university environment, it communicates to Chicana/o students that their community supports their efforts in higher education.

2. Chicana/o families can organize a discussion on campus with university personnel and faculty. For instance, a community town meeting can be held where representatives of Chicana/o families invite the university president, college deans, department chairpersons, and faculty to discuss retention and graduation rates of Chicana/o students.

3. Chicana/o student organizations can sponsor social functions (e.g., movies, lecture series) on campus that involve local Chicana/o community leaders and their families.

Student Training and Learning Environment

1. Faculty can utilize alternative teaching methods and activities to involve Chicana/o (and other racial and ethnic minority) students who do not hold traditional academic values (e.g., competition, individualism). For instance, group projects, oral examinations of class material, and small group discussions (in addition to traditional teaching methods) would provide a more culturally inclusive learning and training environment.

2. University departments and programs can conduct self-studies or evaluations of their academic climate. Currently, there are numerous scales [e.g., Multicultural Competency Checklist (Ponterotto, Alexander, and Grieger, 1995); Racial/Ethnic Academic Climate Survey (Choi-Pearson, Gloria, and Morrow, 1998)] that can assess the implementation and integration of multicultural and diversity issues.

Classroom and Curriculum Environment

1. Because faculty have academic freedom within their classrooms, they are ultimately responsible for integrating cultural and diverse issues into the classroom. This approach would challenge students to move beyond the status quo of a White, male, middle-class perspective and consider multicultural and multicontextual perspectives.

2. Chicana/o student and community leaders can offer to come into classrooms to discuss issues. Similarly, faculty can broaden the boundaries of their classrooms by taking students to different community settings (e.g., churches, non-profit community agencies, community centers, and elementary and secondary schools). These learning opportunities would encourage students and faculty to relate class materials to their experiences of different contexts. Community-based learning experiences also require Chicana/o communities to be receptive as learning and training environments.

Faculty Environment

1. University systems need to broaden their tenure criteria for retention and promotion of faculty. This approach would acknowledge the invaluable services that Chicana/o faculty provide at the community, university, and national levels, often at the expense of traditional tenure-related activities (i.e., publishing). In further expanding the tenure criteria, tenure committees need to recognize the credibility and prestige of specialty journals.

2. Chicana/o student organizations and community leaders can advance the tenure process of Chicana/o assistant professors by communicating support (e.g., letters of recommendation, phone calls) to department chairpersons, college deans, or university presidents.

Conclusion

Creation of a university community that is (a) welcoming and culturally-inclusive (i.e., promotes cultural ambience) and (b) where members are committed to promoting cultural ambience to help Chicana/o students academically persist and succeed is essential to the task of retaining Chicana/o students. That is, the cultural beliefs and values of Chicana/o students must be reflected in their different academic and personal environments to the extent that they can succeed in their environments without needing to hide or change their cultural identities (Gloria and Robinson-Kurpius, 1996).

For what reasons would institutions of higher education not want to provide culturally-relevant learning environments relevant for all students and faculty? Unfortunately, the answer to this complex question may be partly accounted for by the need of some to control economic, political, and social resources and opportunities. Because the Latino population will increase more quickly than the national growth rate over the next 20 years (Chapa and Valencia, 1993), the school-aged population of Chicana/os will also reflect these demographic changes (Nevárez-La Torre and Hidalgo, 1997). As a result, social, political, and cultural changes within academia are inevitable.

Drawing upon the values of Chicana/os (e.g., the strength of family and community), we can influence the type of environment where our students are educated. Through the commitment of university personnel, faculty, families, and community leaders, Chicana/os and non-Chicana/os alike, Chicana/o students can access and achieve a culturally–and academically–relevant higher education. Hence, the educational persistence and success of Chicana/o students may well rest on *la comunidad. Sí se puede.*

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